

Refugee Town Hall Meetings Report

May 6th and 7th

Summarized by Don Cobb

More than 50,000 refugees have resettled in Utah during last three decades. To assess the current refugee situation in Utah, two "Town Meetings" were held on May 6 and 7, 2006 at the Salt Lake County Government Complex in Salt Lake City. An estimated 400 active participants attended both meetings: refugees and persons receiving United States asylum who now call Utah home. Indigenous leaders spoke on behalf of many others at the meetings. Their comments were passionate, poignant, and in some cases very pointed toward various individuals and agencies involved in resettlement activities.

At the inception of this country, the founding fathers stated in the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Examination of the comments at the Town Meetings and the survey responses reveals that in pursuit of happiness, many refugees in Utah are reasonably satisfied with their overall resettlement experience. However, a significant number of refugees have had very negative experiences here.

Town Hall Meetings

As above, two Town Meetings were conducted the evenings of May 6 and 7, 2006 at the Salt Lake County Complex. Both of these public meetings were characterized by intense discussion among the hundreds of refugees present. Individual and group conflicts and general discord about the quality of resettlement services available to refugees in Utah was apparent. Emotions ran high at these events at which the number of negative remarks toward resettlement organizations and government agencies far outweighed positive perceptions. Comments from refugees and others were recorded by a local government official whose personal notes, excerpted below, reflect the varied experiences and overall depth of refugee problems brought forward during the meetings.

Sample Positive Comments

- *"Columbian. Forced out of their country due to the (guerillas). Hid with family members then dad got the money to bring them to the USA. She isn't afraid in the USA."*
- *"Refugee: He stated we are all human and love the USA. He feels the USA needs to do something for the people who have come here. Refugees normally send money back to their home country."*
- *"Refugee Cuba: She feels all refugees need respect, love and dignity from all agencies serving them. No one should be discriminated against due to color, race language or religion. She came here through CCS 11 years ago. She thanked those who have helped her."*
- *"Refugee: He would like to thank the US Government and the Utah Government for welcoming them. He wants to thank CCS, IRC and DWS. After six months, he received help from DWS and the Asian Association."*
- *"Refugee: Came here in 1994. CCS and the Asian Association helped him get a job, taught him how to dress, how to go to school and to be disciplined. He believes in helping himself and helping others."*

- *"Somali Refugee: Came to USA 12 years ago. He is speaking on behalf of all Somalis. This is the first time he has seen Somalis stand up in opposition to the tribal leader. The refugees came here for peace of mind and to educate their children. They get help. He doesn't understand why there are so many complaints. He feels the newcomers get bad information from those in the community."*
- *"Somali Refugee: She thanked the panel. She has been in Utah for 16 years. She works at SLCC and has two master's degrees. She has worked at Valley Mental Health. She feels refugees need to help themselves. She feels there needs to be more funding for education in Utah. We need caseworkers that speak in their language. She is concerned that the civil war in Africa is coming here to Utah"*

Sample Critical Comments

- *"Somali Refugee: With United Nations for 14 years. He notes that many Somalis are staying at home with their families instead of working. They are receiving Medicaid, Food Stamps and cash assistance. He would like to see a youth program for the Somali children. Adult refugees could benefit from a program where they can start a small business as a group. Communication is a big problem. He feels they are required to go to work too soon without the language skills they need. When receiving benefits, they aren't allowed to save any money or their benefits are cut. He would like to see a long-term solution. He would like to see educated refugees get Government jobs and be able to serve as interpreters and understand the culture. This would provide the link between the Government and the refugees. He would like DWS to do home visits so they can see how the refugees live."*
- *"Refugee Russian Turkish Association. They have been here for 18 months. There are about 300 refugees in SLC. He receives about 20 phone calls per day about issues. They do everything in their power but can't do everything. They need a location to organize. They need financial support to help these families. He wants to support the at-risk youth to keep them from narcotics and gangs and ruining their lives. They want to feel equal to other Americans. There are people who have lived here for 8 months and do not have a Utah ID. His children can't go to the library without an ID. Many refugees can't speak English and they want a clear explanation of what they are supposed to do. He has asked for assistance but hasn't received any responses."*
- *"Refugee Chief of Somali: He is speaking for all Somali people. When they were in Somali, they were all Somalis. Now, they seem to be divided into tribes. When he arrived, his house was ready and his food was cooked. He came through the IRC. Nowadays, this isn't happening with the newest refugees coming in. He has taken in a single mother with 8 children. Many refugees that are coming are sent to dirty motels or live with other families for almost a month. He stated many times the sponsors can't speak their language."*
- *"Refugee from Nigeria: Came to the USA in 1999 through Catholic Community Services (CCS). CCS paid his rent for three months and then he was dumped and he received no phone calls. In Nigeria, he was a teacher and businessman. When he came to Utah he attended Community College. He couldn't return to teaching because his family was in a refugee camp. He stopped school and went to work at the food bank. His rent was \$500. He had to pay his bills and pay for the upkeep of his children in the camp. His caseworker helped him find an odd job. Then, the communication stopped. He feels he is treated third class. His family of six lives in a two-bedroom apartment. He is concerned as the USA continues to bring in more refugees even though they are not able to educate or communicate with the ones that are already here. DWS provided \$25.00 in food stamps for three months. He feels the caseworkers are rude to their clients. He couldn't find a job for six months. His church paid the bills."*
- *"Family Member/Youth: She spoke on behalf of a single mother who is here alone. She displayed rusted, dirty cookware and spoke of a dirty mattress she was given. She has six children who are always sick and don't have diapers. She doesn't get enough food stamps or*

cash. She is working volunteer for less than \$800 per month. She cries every night feeling that she had a better life in her former country. She contacted CCS for help. She feels she was denied help due to her tribal affiliation. She was denied childcare at DWS...."

- *"Refugee: Each day he goes to school and volunteers at a program but still can't make his rent. He participates and complies fully but can't make it. He made four trips to the offices but still can't speak the language and waits for work but still can't find a job. His case is scheduled to close soon."*
- *"Refugee Cuba: She feels IRC is a bad agency and is unorganized. She has used her personal time and money to help people make their appointments. She feels the IRC has taken money without helping the refugees. People are given used clothing or food that has expired or ready to expire. Transportation to appointments is an issue. She stated she went to IRC to get a job but was told they don't hire Cubans. Refugees don't know where to go or how to get to appointments. They are just told to be there. She would like more respect."*

The Survey

More than 100 refugees were provided with a survey questionnaire following the Town Meetings. The questionnaire was not intended to be a comprehensive scientific survey (for which UCMG does not have sufficient resources). Nevertheless, the respondent sampling produced significant qualitative data indicating the pressing need for additional study and prompt action by government and private sector organizations on various resettlement issues. For this report, 69 returned surveys were reviewed, some validated by several personal visits to respondent homes by UCMG representatives, and the results grouped herein for ease of review. As in the Town Meetings, the respondents were candid, and often critical of various aspects of the resettlement process.

In their own words, survey respondents described their resettlement experience. (Identifiers have been removed to guard individual privacy):

Sample Positive Responses

- *"...We really achieved our dream. Great appreciation to USA Government and my honorable (IRC) Resettlement Agency. It is with their support that made us (ethnic group) to live in this freedom world of today."*
- *"I feel welcomed and volunteers helped me most."*
- *"Yes, I feel welcome and I was help by any agency be it CCS, @ welfare that is DWS, Asian Association, and SCDU and, in fact, I highly appreciated the manner and the way they really help me. So, from now on, I am waiting (sic) them positively."*
- *"I am also very much satisfied with job development and citizenship assistance provided by the ORR, Refugee Resettlement agencies and great appreciation to the USA Government."*
- *"The I.R.C. surely did (help) and the Utah public also have been so friendly to me. I also appreciate the hospitality of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints; they had their concerns fully portrayed... but I'm still not fully sure if I can share equal freedom as everyone else."*

Sample Critical Responses

- *"When they brought me here, I say, 'Why I come here?' When we came here we felt like we were begging. We went to CCS and (name withheld) refused to help my family. CCS gave us a*

car but it is broken down. We had no soap or toiletries. They are asking me work at DI for \$5.15 an hour. Because of work he (spouse) has no time to learn English.”

- *“It was really difficult first ‘cuz we felt so alone and helpless, we needed some people to orient us but when SCU come to picture they really help us. I personally would say there is more than finance a (re)settlement agency can do to help the immigrant, i.e., SCO don’t give us money but they help us a lot. Last comment: I WISH I NEVER COME THROUGH CCS.”*
- *“I am a refugee from (country withheld) and I am (ethnicity withheld) and I am very glad to be in USA but I am sad about myself because I was in work – my back get hurt and in last five years because of this problem I lost my possibilities one by one. I have diploma and two years college about... building design. I hope I can work in USA and be a positive person for USA people after fixing my health problem because I feel USA is my country and I want to living with my people happy and grateful.”*
- *“DWS was helping me fairly, but they told me ‘no more because you making good money.’ Actually, the money I make is too little to cover my desire (sic). I make like \$7.25 by hour. I work eight hours. I pay house rent... insurance of my car, so I still needed assistance. I don’t have Medicaid. I feel sick, I can’t see doctor due to low income. Your support is highly needed.”*
- *“When we came in the airport the caseworker did not know (we) knew some English. The case worker told her co-worker ‘they don’t understand.’ My daughter said, ‘I do know some of what you are saying.’ They left us with a little food but we did not know what was in the cases. Most of our help is from our own people. This treatment has made us feel less than human – like slaves, that we have to obey them.”*

Immediate Needs and Managing Expectations

A recently released document, “Report on the Utah 2006 Refugee Community Planning Meetings, March 24 and 25, 2008,” prepared and published by ISED Solutions, Salt Lake City, Utah, May 19, 2006, details the content of two earlier Town Meetings involving Utah’s refugee community. The reader is commended to review that detailed report to note the common themes and recurrent problems evident in both the March and May meetings.

For our purposes here, however, the following general issues represent the “Top Five” areas of concern among the refugee population sampling obtained by UCMG from the May Survey and Town Meetings:

- **Language:** Significant language barriers often impede the resettlement process. Refugees without English skills, many of whom have significant literacy problems within their own language, cannot effectively communicate with resettlement workers, agencies and organizations, potential employers, teachers, and the community-at-large. Much more needs to be done to provide interpreters and English instructors prior to, or at the outset of resettlement.
- **Education:** Youth refugees face significant challenges when entering Utah’s public school systems. Peer acceptance, communication, and cultural issues are often difficult or impossible for these youths to overcome. Adult refugees some of whom have advanced degrees and training, find similar problems at higher education institutions or in the working world. Specific education related to the resettlement process appears to be needed by most, if not all, refugees. Those persons who have relatively minimal contact with resettlement organizations and government agencies, especially during their first 90 days in Utah, cannot be expected to effectively educate and enculturate themselves.
- **Employment:** Refugees in Utah often have difficulty finding gainful employment. Many find themselves working in menial jobs that do not provide sufficient income to meet basic expenses. Language barriers; lack of experience, education and training; observance of native cultural traditions; and illnesses and injuries acquired abroad, or here in Utah can prevent many refugees

from earning their own way despite a strong personal desire to succeed. Small business opportunities for refugees in Utah are rare, even for those with sufficient financial resources and experience.

- **Medical:** Refugees often arrive in Utah with a myriad of medical problems. Others, finding themselves in dire economic straits or those not knowledgeable about available health and medical services even after months of residency, may not present themselves for treatment. Fear, cultural traditions, financial capabilities, lack of access to health insurance or Medicaid, or perhaps at worst, a general lack of interest by Utah health and medical professionals for refugee health concerns create major impediments to refugee health and wellness.
- **Resources:** Refugees' experiences with resettlement organizations' and government agencies' resource capabilities are clearly mixed. Organizations and individuals may be lauded by some individuals and reviled by others. Ethnic differences, personal biases, lack of knowledge, exaggerated expectations, fear of government entities and officials, and similar issues all play a part in refugee estrangement from the systems and social services designed to assist them. One recurring theme along refugee respondents, however, is their great difficulty with a real or perceived three-month limitation on assistance from sponsoring organizations. Some refugees indicate they have received even more limited assistance before being compelled to fend for themselves. Worst, perhaps, are the significant financial constraints under which most, or all resettlement organizations and government agencies conduct their work. Demand for services to refugees is very high; capabilities are very limited. Volunteers are clearly helpful to the resettlement process, but they are few in number. The need for legislation to provide increased government funding for refugee resettlement requirements in Utah is readily apparent.

Summary

The refugee resettlement system in Utah cannot claim success, nor can the state concede defeat in this most humane endeavor. Much as there is substantial personal opportunity for the majority of Utah residents, there is substantial room for improvement in refugee resettlement processes and practices. Many challenges exist within the refugee community here. Resettlement organizations and government agencies need substantial support and oversight to effectively conduct their work. Refugees, as a class, need enhanced Language, Education, Employment, Medical, and Resources services as soon as possible to assist them in their collective goal - *to be Americans!*

We invite Governor Huntsman, and all Utah residents, to join with the Utah Consortium of Multicultural Groups to help make Utah's refugee resettlement capabilities a model of effectiveness and efficiency. Together, we can create an environment where the pursuit of happiness becomes a realized dream for all Utah refugees, whose personal contributions and rich heritages improve the quality of life for all Utah residents.

Appendix

Survey Results

Question:

1. I am happy with my Resettlement Process:

Strongly Agree	32
Agree	11
Neutral	7
Disagree	9
Strongly Disagree	10
Not Apply	
Total	<u>69</u>

2. I am happy with my Education Opportunities:

Strongly Agree	12
Agree	17
Neutral	6
Disagree	11
Strongly Disagree	22
No Answer	1
Not Apply	
Total	<u>69</u>

3. I am happy with my Social Services:

Strongly Agree	9
Agree	17
Neutral	9
Disagree	17
Strongly Disagree	13
Not Apply	3
No Answer	1
Total:	<u>69</u>

4. I am happy with my Employment Opportunities:

Strongly Agree	7
Agree	13
Neutral	12
Disagree	16
Strongly Disagree	16
Not Apply	5
Total:	<u>69</u>

5. I am happy with my Housing:

Strongly Agree	13
Agree	16
Neutral	11
Disagree	13
Strongly Disagree	9
Not Apply	5
No Answer	2
Total:	<u>69</u>

6. I am happy with my Money Management and Banking Knowledge:

Strongly Agree	3
Agree	15
Neutral	12
Disagree	17
Strongly Disagree	14
Not Apply	4
No Answer/given to answers	4
Total:	<u>69</u>

7. I am happy with my Transportation Services:

Strongly Agree	8
Agree	15
Neutral	9
Disagree	24
Strongly Disagree	10
Not Apply	3
Total:	<u>69</u>

8. I am happy with my Health/Mental Health Services:

Strongly Agree	13
Agree	15
Neutral	8
Disagree	15
Strongly Disagree	10
Not Apply	4
No Answer	4
Total:	<u>69</u>

9. I am happy with my Legal Services:

Strongly Agree	8
Agree	16
Neutral	14
Disagree	7
Strongly Disagree	10
Not Apply	13
No Answer	1
Total:	<u>69</u>

10. I am happy with my Substance Abuse Prevention Services:

Strongly Agree	13
Agree	14
Neutral	15
Disagree	5
Strongly Disagree	4
Not Apply	12
No Answer	6
Total:	<u>69</u>

11. I am happy with my Family-Related Services:

Strongly Agree	10
Agree	17
Neutral	12
Disagree	13
Strongly Disagree	13
Not Apply	2
No Answer	2
Total:	<u>69</u>

12. I am happy with my Civic Lessons (Citizenship) Services:

Strongly Agree	12
Agree	18
Neutral	5
Disagree	12
Strongly Disagree	12
Not Apply	4
No Answer	6
Total:	<u>69</u>

13. I am happy with my Small Business Opportunities:

Strongly Agree	5
Agree	7
Neutral	13
Disagree	15
Strongly Disagree	18
Not Apply	9
No Answer	2
Total:	<u>69</u>

Refugee Concerns

From 69 Representative Respondents to the Survey Questionnaire

	<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Child/Youth Programs</i>	<i>Discrimination/Equality</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Employment/Low Wages</i>	<i>Expenses/Living</i>	<i>Funding</i>	<i>Housing Conditions</i>	<i>Language Barrier</i>	<i>Medical Needs</i>	<i>Resources</i>	<i>Transportation</i>
Afghan	<u>**Feels they were forced out of their country**</u>											
African			1			1		2		3		1
Black Affairs					1	1		1			1	1
Columbian	<u>**Feels they were forced out of their country**</u>											
Cuban	1		1		2			1		1	1	1
Indian							1				1	
Liberian				2	1	1	2				1	
Muslim												
Nigerian	1	1		2	2				3			
Russian/Turkish	1	2	2	2			2		7	3	4	
Somali	1	2		5		2	2	3	8	3		2
Spanish				1					1		1	
Sudanese	1	1		2	6				3	1		
Unknown		1	2	1	2	1		2	1	3	4	

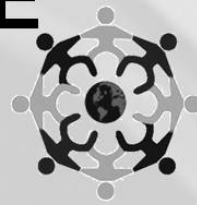
Benefits: Cut due to employment, Elderly, Child/Youth to Include: Daycare, Youth Programs
 Education to Include: Funding requests, opportunities
 Employment to Include: Unavailability of Jobs, Low - paying jobs
 Expenses/Living to Include: Rent, utilities, food, etc.

Funding to Include: Businesses, Education, Organizational
 Housing to Include: Living Conditions
 Language Barriers to Include: Translators
 Medical to Include: Health & Medical Care Needs

Resources to Include: More Case-workers, Help with Cultural Shock, Mental Health Needs, Abandoned Family Members, Lack of Sponsor, Resettlement Follow-up, Organizational Support, Issuance of ID, Financial Support



REFUGEE & ASYLEE TOWN MEETINGS



The Utah Consortium of Multicultural Groups

Respectfully invites you to
share your resettlement experiences

Make Your Voices Heard!

The Salt Lake County Government Center
2001 South State, North Building Room
Council Chamber

**Saturday, May 6, 2006
5:30 PM - 8:30 PM**

**Sunday, May 7, 2006
5:30 PM - 8:30 PM**

Russian Turkish Association - Mr. Suleyman Khalilov
Sudanese Refugee Association - Mr. John Mayoul
Alrasool Islamic Center - Mr. Ghulam Hasnain
SCD- Utah - Mr. Sharif Kahareba
Liberian Association - Mr. Frances Weah
The Muslim Forum of Utah - Mr. Bobby Darvish
Nigerian Association of Utah - Dr. James Odunze
Somali Community Services - Mr. Abdullahi Kulmiye

Mr. Verdi White II - Deputy Utah Homeland Security
Ms. Tani Pack Downing - DWS, Executive Director
Mayor Peter Corroon - Salt Lake County
Mr. Stanford Aderibigbe - UCMG
Mr. Ivan Wongan - Tribal Chairman
Ms. Mary Maughan - Senator Bennett's Office
Dr. Ljubica "Buba" Roth - Utah Peace Institute

For More Information Please Call (801) 519-0100

Concurrences